

CAPTURING CHANGE: DOCUMENTING TEN YEARS OF INTERDISCIPLINARY PRACTICES WITHIN SPATIAL POETICS

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I can remember very distinct things about how we decided to program/create/imagine/manifest Spatial Poetics. I remember meeting Miko Hoffman who had just been newly hired on as the Festival Coordinator and how she had contacted me to sit on their Programming Committee. I remember I was only in my fourth year of art school and was running from the studio to meet her in what was once called Video In Studios, now VIVO Media Arts Centre. We had a quick exchange about what it might be like to create a space that would offer different artistic parameters to the conventional literary reading. Both interested in an experimentation within the Festival programming, we had wondered what the results would be if we let the collaborations between artistic forms speak for themselves. What would rupture and be created if we honored chance and artistic risk, giving up the role of distinguishing discipline and valuing collaboration and process over finished product.

What began as a new programming initiative through Vancouver's Powell Street Festival Society¹ has taken its own formation and moved through various incarnations and has become a continuous creative incubator for a broad range of not easily defined cultural practices. The event was imagined and created by myself and Miko Hoffman, at a time when the Festival itself was making a transition from a community and volunteer-led Festival to one which would go on to become a government funded professional arts festival/organization.



Documentation still from Laiwan's *whale (contrary to shaping a permanence)*, Performers Eileen Kage and mPennyfish, Spatial Poetics 2002.

Photo credit: Unknown.

“With my new mom brain, I can't really trust my memory, but I do recall that the PSF board recognized that some proactive programming needed to take place, and that was my job to kick-start it! I had been hired by them to be the summer festival Coordinator, which at the time was just a temporary 6-month position, and it happened to coincide at a pivotal time when the board realized that in order to survive as a festival, some changes needed to happen. There was major burnout in terms of resources, both human and financial. Conversations with the Cultural Affairs office at the City of Vancouver prompted the board to prioritize professional arts programming, and not just booking the artists but *paying* them (what a concept!). At the time, all of the great artists who performed at the festival were volunteering. The board kept me on past the 6-month contract and I went to work looking for artists and interesting

1 Incorporated in 1985 as a non-profit Society, it produces an annual Festival (first produced in 1977), which is a celebration of Japanese Canadian arts and culture and is the largest event of its kind in Canada and the longest running community arts festival in the Lower Mainland.



Documentation still from Madoka Hara and Lee Hutzulak's *MSG ESP*, Spatial Poetics 2004. Photo credit: John Elder.

projects, and getting grant applications out.”²

Now after ten years, I look back to realize that what began with no clear intention of becoming a series would carry on producing a body of work that is what we would now define as ‘interdisciplinary.’ The Festival already had a history of presenting artist pioneers who were pushing the boundaries of artistic form and content such as Roy Kiyooka, the Frank Chickens, Nobuo Kubota and Kei Takei but the space exclusively for experimentation was new terrain. Slowly but surely resources were expanding and there were opportunities for the Festival to change and to bring together other forms of cultural production within its long history of programming which now spans 35 years. Spatial Poetics was just one of the new programming initiatives which let go of deliberate and pre-determined choices to make way for experimentation and a place for artistic creation.³ The non-structure and openness of Spatial Poetics required trust from the commissioned artists and their collaborators and for each team to feel that

² In conversation with Miko Hoffman, 2011.

³ The Festival has gone on to create other interdisciplinary and community-engaged projects that engage with multiple publics and spaces, such as *Lost and Found*, *Dinner Cabaret*, *Chez D*.

the space was ‘safe’ enough for this experimentation. An example of a collaboration that embraced the concepts of courting risk and improvisation was Laiwan’s whale: (contrary to shaping a permanence) with Eileen Kage, and mPennyfish. Created in 2002 at the now non-existent blinding light cinema, the performance evoked a feeling of temporality as sound improvisations using non-identifiable instruments generated bellows and breaths against a hauntingly poetic video projection of crashing waves and a stirring crow. The collaborative efforts of all three performers created a sense of playful and poetic whimsy that appeared for that instance on stage that evening and then disappeared. But for some artists the event itself was used as grounds to test works-in-progress which would eventually lead to larger forms of production. Theatre performer and creator, Maiko Bae Yamamoto and her father, Minoru Yamamoto’s collaboration was an excerpt of a theatrical performance that would later go on to become a touring full-length production produced by Theatre Replacement called *Train* in 2008.

The debut of Spatial Poetics not only marked a moment of transition for the PSF Society but also marked a shift in the Festival’s identity and a new trend of programming that would move spatially across the city. The 2008 edition of Spatial Poetics, curated by Miko Hoffman, was site-specific and entered into the public domain by inhabiting the form of performances in storefronts and as ephemera around the edges of the city. The collaboration of Vanessa Kwan and Diyan Achajdi called *So Long We Miss You Forever* was imagined through text-based posters which were placed in and around the boarded construction walkways and street poles in Vancouver’s DTES. The words themselves were cut out letters found in handmade signs spelling out phrases such as ‘So Long,’ ‘Forever’ and ‘We Miss You.’ Natalie Purschwitz’s former Hunt and Gather retail space was transformed into a small theatrical space for Kimberley Cooper’s choreography which

mirrored the mass construction forming along the Gastown area as a means of ‘revitalization’ and ‘renewal’ of the city for the 2010 Olympics.

In the last ten years the event itself has shifted too—Miko Hoffman programmed the event from 2003-2008, but in recent years other curators such as Kristen Lambertson and Naomi Horii introduced their own interpretations of Spatial Poetics. The event has been presented ten times longer than I had ever imagined. Jukkai. And I wonder how much longer before another shift transforms this space into another loop within the growing helix of arts festival programming within the Powell

Street Festival Society. The new formations of practices that are interdisciplinary open up the possibility for other forms of cultural production, social engagement and new audiences. It is almost impossible to record and document all that Spatial Poetics has been from an early concept between two co-founders, to the intimate conversations that go on between collaborators on process, to the moment the performance goes live on the night of the event. However fleeting and transient the process, collaboration and experimentation, the creative impetus for a beginning is somehow now marked and I trust has the possibility to continue to grow.



Documentation still from Maiko Bae Yamamoto and Minoru Yamamoto’s *Train*, Spatial Poetics 2004.
Photo credit: John Elder.